

# Exploring Hawaiian Sovereignty: "President Declares Overthrow Illegal"

By Anthony Castanha

*Writer's Note: The following article is a continuation of our series on Hawaiian Sovereignty. These excerpts were taken from U. S. President Grover Cleveland's written address to the U. S. Senate and House of Representatives on Dec. 18, 1893. With Jan. 17, 1893, marking the 100th anniversary of the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy, HPP is examining and providing its readers with some background on this issue. Our series has previously on ancient Hawaiian history, the legacy of Captain Cook, Kamehameha the Great, the American missionary influence and events of the 1893 overthrow of Queen Liliuokalani.*

In my recent annual message to the Congress, I briefly referred to our relations with Hawaii and expressed the intention of transmitting further information on the subject when additional advices permitted.

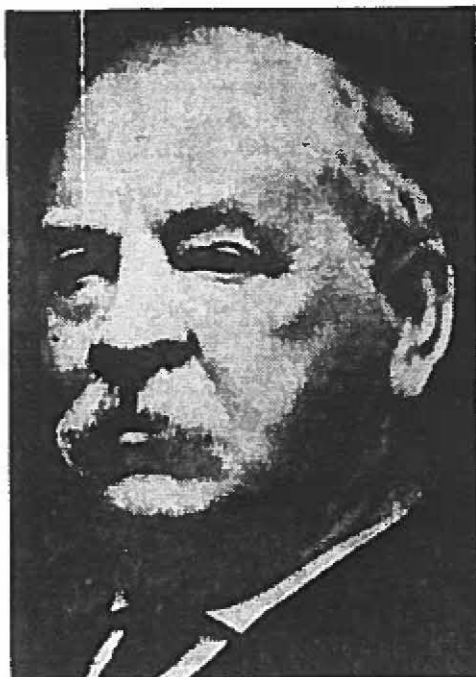
Though now I am able to report a definite change in the actual situation, I am convinced that the difficulties lately created both here and in Hawaii and now standing in the way of a solution, through executive action, of the problem presented, render it proper, and expedient, that the matter should be referred to the broader authority and discretion of Congress, with a full explanation of the endeavor thus far made to deal with the emergency, and a statement of the considerations which have governed my actions.

When the present Administration entered upon its duties, the Senate had under consideration a treaty providing for the annexation of the Hawaiian Islands to the territory of the United States. Surely under our Constitution and laws, the enlargement of our limits is a manifestation of the highest attribute of sovereignty, and if entered upon as an Executive act, all things relating to the transaction should be clear and free from suspicion.

Additional importance attached to this particular treaty of annexation, because it contemplated a departure from unbroken American tradition, in providing for the addition to our territory of islands of other contents of this note, the absolute truth of this latter statement is incontestable.

When the note was written and delivered, the committee, so far as it appears, had neither a man nor a gun at their command, and after its delivery they became so panic-stricken at their position that they sent some of their number to interview the Minister and request him not to land the United States forces 'till the next morning.

But he replied that the troops had been ordered and whether the committee was ready or not, the



*President Grover Cleveland—In a written address to Congress on Dec. 18, 1893, U. S. President Grover Cleveland strongly condemned the overthrow of the Hawaiian government by provisional forces as "wholly without justification" and as an "act of war." (Photo from Ka leo O Hawai'i)*

landing should take place. And so it happened that on the 16th day of January between four and five o'clock in the afternoon a detachment of Marines from the United States steamer in Boston, with two pieces of artillery, landed at Honolulu.

Indeed, the fact that after having called for the landing of the United States forces on the plea of danger to life and property, the Committee of Safety themselves requested the Minister to postpone action, exposed the untruthfulness of their representation of present peril to life and property.

The peril they saw was an anticipation growing out of guilty intentions on their part and something which, though not then existing, they knew would certainly follow their attempt to overthrow the Government of the queen without the aid of the United States forces.

Thus it appears that Hawaii was taken possession of by the United States forces without the consent or wish of the government of the islands, or of anybody else so far as shown, except the United States Minister.

Therefore the military occupation of Honolulu by

the United States on the day mentioned was wholly without justification, either as an occupation by consent or as an occupation necessitated by dangers threatening American life and property.

It must be accounted for in some other way and on some other ground, and its real motive and purpose are neither obscure nor far to seek.

The United States forces being now on the scene and favorably stationed, the committee proceeded to carry out their original scheme.

They met the next morning, Tuesday the 17th, perfected the plan of temporary government and fixed upon its principal officers ten of whom were drawn from the 13 members of the Committee of Safety between 1 and 2 o'clock, by squads and by the sea, more than two thousand miles removed from our nearest coast.

On Saturday January 14, 1893, the Queen of Hawaii, who had been contemplating the proclamation of a new constitution, had, in deference to the wishes and remonstrances of her cabinet, renounced the project for at least the present.

Taking this relinquished purpose as a basis of action, citizens of Honolulu numbering from fifty to one hundred, mostly resident aliens, met in a private office and selected a so-called Committee of Safety, composed of thirteen persons, seven of whom were foreign subjects, and consisted of five Americans, one Englishman and one German.

This committee, though its designs were not revealed, had in view nothing less than annexation to the United States, and between Saturday the 14th and the following Monday the 16th of January—though exactly what action was taken may not be clearly disclosed—they were certainly in communication with the United States Minister.

On Monday morning the Queen and her cabinet made public proclamation, with a notice which was specially served upon the representatives of all foreign governments, that "nay" changes in the constitution would be sought only in the methods provided by that instrument. Nevertheless, at the call and under the auspices of the Committee of Safety, a mass meeting of citizens was held on that day to protest against the Queen's alleged illegal and unlawful proceedings and purposes.

Even at this meeting the Committee of Safety continued to disguise their real purpose and contented themselves with procuring the passage of a resolution, denouncing the Queen and empowering the committee to devise ways and means "to secure the permanent maintenance of law and order and the protection of life, liberty and property in Hawaii."

This meeting adjourned between 3 and 4 o'clock in the afternoon. On the same day, and immediately

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after such adjournment, the committee, unwilling to take further steps without the cooperation of the U. S. Minister, addressed him a note representing that the public safety was menaced and that lives and property were in danger and concluded as follows:

"We are unable to protect ourselves without aid and therefore pray for the protection of the United States forces." Whatever may be thought of the different routes to avoid notice, and having first taken the precaution of ascertaining whether there was anyone there to oppose them, they proceeded to the Government building to proclaim the new government.

No sign of opposition was manifest, and thereupon an American citizen began to read the proclamation from the steps of the Government building almost entirely with auditors. It is said that before the reading was finished, quite a concourse of persons, variously estimated at from 50 to 100, some armed and some unarmed, gathered about the committee to give them aid and confidence.

This statement is not unimportant, since the one controlling factor in the whole affair was unquestionably the United States Marines, who, drawn up under arms and with artillery in readiness only seventy-six yards distant, dominated the situation.

...I believe that a candid and thorough examination of the facts will force the conviction that the provisional government owes its existence to an armed invasion by the United States.

Fair-minded people with the evidence before them will hardly claim that the Hawaiian Government was overthrown by the people of the islands or that the provisional government had ever existed with their consent.

I do not understand that nay member of this government claims that the people would uphold it by their suffrages if they were allowed to vote on the question.

...As I apprehend the situation, we are brought face to face with the following conditions: the lawful Government of Hawaii was overthrown without the drawing of a sword or the firing of a shot by a process every step of which, it may be safely asserted, is directly traceable to and dependent for its success upon the agency of the United States acting through its diplomatic and naval representatives.

But for the notorious predilections of the United States Minister for annexation, the Committee of Safety, which should be called the Committee of Annexation, would never have existed.

But for the landing of the United States forces upon false pretexts, respecting the danger to life and property, the committee would never have exposed themselves to the pains and penalties of treason by undertaking the subversion of the Queen's Government.

And finally, but for the lawless occupation of Honolulu under false pretexts by the U. S. forces,



*Minister John L. Stevens—U. S. Minister John L. Stevens, without the authority of the U. S. Congress and consent of the Hawaiian government and people, helped lead the effort to overthrow the Queen. The overthrow not only violated five bilateral treaties, as well as international law, but also saw the theft of Hawaiian lands and treasury. (Photo from the Native Hawaiians Study Commission Volume II)*

and for Minister Stevens forces were its sole support and constituted its only military strength, the Queen and her government would never have yielded to the provisional government, even for a time and for the sole purpose of submitting her case to the enlightened justice of the United States.

Believing, therefore, that the United States could not, under the circumstances disclosed, annex the islands without justly incurring the imputation of acquiring them by unjustifiable methods, I shall not again submit the treaty of annexation to the Senate for its consideration and in the instructions to Minister Willis, a copy of which accompanies this message, I have directed him to so inform the provisional government.

But in the present instance our duty does not, in my opinion, end with refusing to consummate this questionable transaction.

It has been the boast of our Government that it seeks to do justice in all things without regard to the strength or weakness of those with whom it deals.

I mistake the American people if they favor the odious doctrine that there is no such thing as international morality, that there is one law for a strong

nation and another for a weak one, and that even by indirection a strong power may with impunity despoil a weak one of its territory.

By an act of war committed with the participation of a diplomatic representative of the United States and without authority of Congress, the Government of a feeble, but friendly and confiding people has been overthrown.

A substantial wrong has thus been done which a due regard for our national character as well as the rights of the injured people requires we should endeavor to repair.

...In short, they (the Provisional Government) require that the past should be buried and that the restored government should reassume its authority as if its continuity had not been interrupted.

These conditions have not proved acceptable to the Queen, and though she has been informed that they will be insisted upon, and that, unless acceded to, the efforts of the president to aid in the restoration of her government will cease, I have not thus far learned that she is willing to yield them her acquiescence.

The check which my plans have thus encountered has prevented their presentation to the members of the provisional government, while unfortunate public misrepresentations of the situation and exaggerated statements of the sentiments of our people have obviously injured the prospects of successful Executive mediation.

I therefore submit this communication with its accompanying exhibits, embracing James Blount's report, the evidence and statements taken by him at Honolulu, the instructions given to both Mr. Blount and Minister Willis, and correspondence connected with the affair in hand.

In commending this subject to the extended powers and wide discretion of the Congress, I desire to add the assurance that I shall be much gratified to cooperate in any legislative plan which may be devised for the solution of the problem before us which is consistent with American honor, integrity and morality.

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